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ABSTRACT

A study tested the hypothesis that essay examination topics specifying full rhetorical contexts are superior to less information-laden versions of the same topics. Subjects were 360 college students who were given 45 minutes to write essays on 6 topics phrased at 3 information (or specificity of rhetorical context) levels--high, low, and moderate. The essays were holistically scored and were analyzed for the effects of subject matter, information load, and length on score. Results showed that full rhetorical context topics yielded the lowest mean score, while moderate information topics yielded the highest. A critical reading revealed that moderate information load essays were apt to be more sharply focused and better organized. There was also a significant correlation between essay length and score, with longer papers receiving higher scores than shorter papers. The findings suggest that the information level of examination topics can affect writing elicited by a timed test. They also call into question the preference for full rhetorical contexts in writing assignments. (The three versions of the six topics are included in the paper.) (FL)

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Rhetorical Specification in Essay Examination Topics: An Experimental Study

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Purposes of the Study

Test makers have devoted considerable effort to developing essay examination topics, but their work has depended on critical judgments and field tests rather than on principles derived from research. There is little doubt that topics do affect writers, but what precise effects they have are still matters of conjecture and opinion. Current professional opinion favors topics that provide writers with full rhetorical contexts--purpose, audience, form, mode of discourse, voice. Identifying these variables, it is held, enables writers to understand more precisely the demands of particular writing tasks and so to produce more fully realized, coherent compositions than would otherwise be possible. This position is persuasive, but unfounded: there ~~is~~ are virtually no research data to support the idea that rhetorical specification assures better topics.

Hoetker (1979) recommended that the topics for the Florida Teacher Certification Examination should specify full rhetorical contexts and should take the form of scenarios, or hypothetical situations that teachers are apt to face in the real world. He qualified his recommendation by admitting it was not based on research evidence. This study was commissioned to test the hypothesis that role-playing scenarios specifying full rhetorical contexts were indeed superior to other topic formats.

Design of the Study

The six essay topics used in the study were selected from a list generated by a panel of experienced teachers of writing. Criteria governing topic selection required that each topic be clearly and explicitly phrased; be on a subject familiar to every examinee; be stimulating, fresh, and of middle emotional ground (neither too pedestrian nor too sensational); and be nonbiased and nonbiasing. Successive reviews, critiques, and emendations by the panel and by two consultants produced the six topics used in the study.

Each topic was then phrased at three different levels of "information load," or degree of specification of rhetorical context. Level 1, low information load, presented each topic in a brief phrase only, leaving the writer free to make decisions about audience, purpose, form, mode of discourse, and voice without guidance of any kind. Level 2, moderate information load, presented a general introductory statement and then asked for a personal essay, giving the writer an orientation to the task but leaving most specifications unstated. Level 3, high information load, described a hypothetical situation requiring the writer to state personal views on a topic as in Level 2, but this time supplying the writer with a full rhetorical context. Brief instructions to "write on the topic below" accompanied each topic.

The topics at their three levels of information appeared on the test cover sheets as follows:

Topic 1

Level 1 -- The "basics" of education.

Level 2 -- Although much has been made in recent years of the "basics" of education, there is still widespread debate over what the term really means. From your own point of view, what are the "basics" of education, and why do you think so?

Level 3 -- Your school, like most, has been caught in the national trend to return to the "basics" of education. Just now you find you have a good chance to express your views on the subject. Your principal has appointed you a member of the school curriculum committee. Its chief task this year will be to define the "basics" of education. At its first meeting, the committee decides that each member should draft a statement expressing his or her own position on the issue.

Write that statement describing your own personal beliefs about the "basics" of education.

Topic 2

Level 1 -- Teaching as a career.

Level 2 -- People choose to pursue certain careers for a variety of different reasons. You have chosen to be a teacher. Why?

Level 3 -- You are a teacher in a town which houses a university. One day you get a call from one of its officials inviting you to participate in a career day for freshmen. The official explains that you would be addressing a group of students who have indicated some interest in becoming teachers. The group will be sizable though not as large as some others because—as everyone knows—many college students these days are choosing careers in business and technology rather than teaching. The students will be particularly interested, the official says, in hearing why you decided to become a teacher. You accept the invitation.

Write your statement explaining to college freshmen why you chose to become a teacher.

Topic 3

Level 1 -- Discipline in the classroom.

Level 2 -- Discipline in the classroom has always been an important concern of teachers and parents alike. What are your personal views on maintaining classroom discipline?

Level 3 -- You are applying for a teaching job in a school district. The district school officials want to know what position prospective teachers take on the matter of classroom discipline. Your employment application, therefore, includes a section asking for a personal statement on the issue.

Write that statement expressing your own views on maintaining classroom discipline.

Topic 4

Level 1 -- The four-day work week.

Level 2 -- There is considerable talk today about a switch to a four-day work week. Under such an arrangement, the average work day would be appreciably longer than it is now. What are your thoughts on the matter of the four-day work week?

Level 3 -- To conserve fuel--gasoline, heating oil, and electricity--the local school board is proposing a switch to a four-day school week. If the proposal passes, the average school day would be considerably extended. As a teacher, you would be directly affected. You would, therefore, like to have a voice in the matter. You decide the best way to make your views known is to write to the school

board stating your position and explaining why you hold it.

Write that letter expressing your views on the four-day work week.

Topic 5

Level 1 -- American wastefulness.

Level 2 -- It has been said that Americans are generally wasteful of their natural resources. What is your own position on the subject of American wastefulness?

Level 3 -- You are walking though the woods with your family looking for a suitable picnic site. Right in the midst of what is otherwise a beautiful setting, you come upon a huge pile of discarded goods--clothing, furniture, even an old washing machine. This display brings to mind charges you have heard about American wastefulness. You begin to think seriously about the matter and decide to express your views. Later you write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

Write that letter expressing your personal views on the issue of American wastefulness.

Topic 6

Level 1 -- Violence in the schools.

Level 2 -- According to recent reports in the news media, there has been a marked increase in incidents of violence in public schools. Why, in your view, does such violence occur?

Level 3 -- You are a member of a local school council made up of teachers and citizens. A recent increase in incidents of violence in the schools has gotten widespread coverage in the local media. As a teacher, you are aware of the problem, though you have not been personally involved in an incident. At its next meeting, the council elects to take some action. It asks each member to draft a statement setting forth his or her view on why such violence occurs. The statements will be published in the local newspaper.

Write that statement expressing your own personal views on the causes of violence in the schools.

The six topics at the three information levels--eighteen combinations in all--were randomized and administered to a sample of undergraduate education majors at Florida State University and at the University of South Florida. Test conditions closely resembled those prescribed for the first round of the actual examination: examinees wrote in classrooms, under a proctor's supervision, and were given 45 minutes to plan, write, and revise their essays. Unlike actual administrations of the examination, however, the field trial allowed no

choice of topic. The writers were not aware till they arrived in class that they would be taking a writing test. The proctors reported that this condition had no apparent effect on the attitudes of the writers toward the test, and the essays themselves made no mention of it.

The examination was administered to 360 students, yielding a total of 20 essays in each cell of the design.

A panel of three raters, whose reliability was already established, read and holistically rated the essays using criteria and descriptions of levels of competence developed for the examination (see Appendix). A referee read and rated essays receiving discrepant ratings (72, or 20% of the sample), and his ratings replaced the discrepant ones according to previously established procedures. Final scores of the essays (the sum of the three ratings in each case) ranged from 3 to 12. The minimal passing score was 5. (It has since been raised to 6). Table 1 shows the distribution of scores received by the field trial essays.

Insert Table 1 here

Two indicators of interrater reliability were computed: first, a set of four indices of rater agreement developed for the writing subtest (Brossell and Hoetker, 1979) and second, an "Alpha coefficient," a measure of the expected correlation between the ratings of the rating team on this task and those of a hypothetical team of similar raters doing the same task. Interrater reliability was judged acceptable: each of the four indices fell within the prescribed target ranges, and the Alpha coefficient for all raters was .828.

Analysis of the Data

The purpose of the statistical analysis was to determine the extent to which the final scores of the essays written on the field trial depended on three factors--the topics themselves (i. e., the subject matter), the information load of the topics, and the length of the students' essays. Toward this end, two statistical operations were undertaken: analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a multiple regression analysis of the effect of length on score.

The first of three ANOVAs tested for the effects of subject matter and information load only, ignoring length. The second ANOVA processed length with the main effects of subject matter and information lead, treating all three factors equally. The third ANOVA treated length as a covariate, correcting the effects of subject matter and information load for the effects of length.

In the first ANOVA, there were no statistically significant effects of subject matter and information load on score, but the effect of information load was clearly much stronger than the effect of subject matter, approaching statistical significance at the .14 level.

In the second ANOVA, the effects of subject matter and information load were once again ~~in~~non-significant, but the effect of length on score was significant at the .001 level.

In the third ANOVA, the effects of subject matter and information load were again ~~in~~non-significant, but the effect of information load approached significance at the .075 level. The effect of length on score was once again significant at the .001 level.

A multiple regression analysis showed a significant correlation between length and score. The relationship was curvilinear: up to and including a score of 9, the mean length of the essays gradually increased; above 9, mean length varied widely and the correlation broke down. Since 95% of the essays received scores from 3 to 9, it can be said that the longer one's paper was (in a range of roughly 200-400 words), the more likely it was to get a higher score.

Effects of subject matters and information levels. The subject matter of the topics did not make a significant difference. Mean scores for the six subject matters ranged from 5.97 to 6.35, with five means clustering within .3 of a rating point. This tended to confirm the statistical ~~in~~non-significance of subject matter effects on scores.

The information level effects were, on the other hand, much stronger. Table 2 shows the mean scores and mean lengths for essays written at the three information levels of each of the six topics.

Insert Table 2

It has already been shown there was a moderate relationship between information level and score and that essay length was significantly correlated with score. Now note that the Level 3 essays--full rhetorical

context--have the lowest mean score (5.98) and the shortest mean length (288 words). The differences between these means and those of the other two information levels are not large or statistically significant. But they are contrary to what those who assume the superiority of a full rhetorical context would predict.

Insert Table 3

A critical reading of the essays gives an even stronger impression that the essays written on Level 3 topics are the least satisfactory of the lot. Full rhetorical specification may have interacted with the students' prior training and expectations in ways that prevented them from doing their best writing.

Critical Analysis of the Essays

My assistant Barbara Ash and I read the essays to see if our impressions of them would help us understand better the results of the statistical analysis. To a considerable extent, they did.

We found the essays a desultory lot, distinguished chiefly (though not uniformly) by blandness of expression, overgeneralization, and an uncertain command of the conventions of written English. Many essays struck us as linguistic equivalents of photographs taken by an unsteady hand, the contours hazy and the subjects somewhat out of focus. The writers failed to find what they wanted to say soon enough--many rambled in the manner of free-writing exercises--or were obviously uncommitted to exploring their real feelings about the topic. In a

number of instances, the writers simply had nothing to say. For whatever reasons, the essays were patently mediocre.

There was one notable exception, however. The 20 essays prompted by Level 2 of Topic 6 (violence in the schools) were, as a group, strikingly superior: better organized, more sharply focussed, and stylistically less awkward. (They also received the highest mean score: 7.05). Writers addressed this topic more quickly than others and had more to say about it. Here, for example, are the opening lines of two essays, which received scores of 7 and 9, respectively:

> Recent reports in the news media show a marked increase in the incidents of violence in public schools. It is my belief that the increased incidents of violence are a direct result of four recent changes. They are bussing, working parents, media, and societies increasing pressures.

> I feel that there are three major factors that have contributed to the increase in incidents of violence in public schools. The adverse influence that television has on many people, the fear that many teachers have of being hurt or sued, and the hardships that the current economic situation imposes on many students all seem to work together to cultivate an air of violence in many public schools.

While these excerpts are not, of course, polished, each writer confronts the topic directly and immediately, offers a specific state-

ment of response to the topic, and establishes right off the direction the essay will take. Each, in fact, goes on to elaborate its ideas according to the plan established in the opening sentences. (Although we found no significant relationships between scores and subject matters, there is obviously some sort of interaction here between subject matter and information load. Students writing on Level 2 of the "school violence" topic apparently found the combination of variables most congenial.)

These examples stand in sharp contrast to the beginnings of most other essays in the sample. Here are the opening lines of typical essays on the same topic set at different information levels, the first at Level 1 and the second at Level 3. The essays from which these lines are taken got scores of 5.

> First of all this is a broad subject which has various meanings. Violence in schools can mean teacher to teacher, student to student, administration to teachers, race to race, sex to sex, or even janitor to janitor. From past experience, I tend to look more towards race to race.

> I believe that the causes of violence in the schools depends upon many different environments, personalities, attitudes and other cultural backgrounds. First of all some of the violence could come from the person themselves.

These openings fail to establish the writer's stance toward the topic. The first writer speculates pointlessly on the topic's meaning; the second simply throws about abstractions. The immediate limiting and focussing of the issue that marked the openings of the first two essays are lacking in the latter pair. Our general impressions of the Level 2 essays convinced us that they deserved the higher mean score the raters gave them. It is worthwhile speculating what caused this difference.

Interpreting the Effects of Information Levels

The three information levels vary according to how closely each approaches a full rhetorical context. Level 1 provides little information and no context whatsoever; Level 2 supplies some information and an orientation to the topic; Level 3 provides the requisite information for a full rhetorical context--audience, purpose, form, and subject. All three affect writers in particular ways.

Level 1, because of its low degree of specification, challenges a writer first to define the topic at hand and then to decide what to say about it. Such a task throws a writer on his or her personal resources early, forcing quick decisions. No method of organization or composing procedure is suggested or implied: if a writer cannot bring some organizational principle directly to bear on an essay, he or she is likely to flounder about. When a writer meets these initial challenges successfully, however, the result is quite like a good Level 2 essay, with the exception that it may take a bit longer to bring the subject into focus:

> Violence has been an increasing problem in public schools for some time. This violence is directed at the school building, at other students and at teachers. It has grown to such a point now, that some schools are even considering and planning for school security departments to be set up inside the schools. These would be like small police departments that would be present to try and curtail some of the violence that occurs.
>
> The issue that should be of most importance to educators is why this violence occurs. What is causing students to become so disatisfied with schools that they feel the need to display this show of violence towards schools? Have the pressures of society in general and school specifically become so demanding that students feel a need to break free? . . .
>
> As a teacher, I need to plan a course of action to take in the case that I am confronted with a violent outburst. I think that the most important thing to remember is the safety of the other students and of myself.

Here the writer spends the first paragraph working out--setting up and then narrowing down—the issue of violence in the schools before arriving in the second paragraph at a series of questions that serve as a jumping-off point for the expression of her own views on the subject in the third paragraph. The second paragraph appears to do for this

writer exactly what the Level 2 version of the topic does for other writers: it helps her come to grips with the topic and sets up the line of development her essay will take.

Level 2 gives a writer a definite place to begin by making a statement about a topic. Indeed many writers in the sample used the statement as a means of establishing their own positions on a topic. The critical difference between Level 2 and Level 1 appears to be the former's tendency to get writers writing quickly and purposefully by giving them enough structure to negotiate two compositional hurdles, focus and organization. On a 45-minute examination, that is crucial.

Level 3, the level establishing a full rhetorical context, did not help examinees to organize and focus their writing. (Differently phrased scenarios might, of course, have had other effects.) Many writers failed to go beyond a rehash of the information in a given scenario, which often seemed to act as a hindrance rather than the facilitator it was meant to be. Perhaps the hypothetical situations were inappropriate introductions to the task of writing personal statements on large issues. Asking writers for a statement based on a particular set of circumstances may have elicited shallower responses than asking them for a position on a general issue. Perhaps the Level 3 topics were simply a type students had not encountered previously, and they were uncertain how to interpret and respond to them. Such speculation aside, it remains that the topic format presenting a full rhetorical context did not ensure that writers in this sample produced consistently better papers than the two formats supplying less in-

formation about a topic. In fact, something like the reverse was true.

Conclusions and Implications

The study suggests that the information level of topics can affect the quality of writing done on a timed essay test by facilitating or hindering one's ability to focus and organize one's essay. Further, it raises questions about the widely accepted notion that full rhetorical contexts are superior to less information-laden versions of topics. Such contexts may, as they apparently sometimes did in this study, inhibit writers by offering too much information to be parroted back purposelessly. An effect of full rhetorical context may be to invite writers to waste time when time is limited.

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Table 1

Distribution of Essay Scores

Score	n	% of Sample
3	37	10.3
4[a]	0	0
5	100	27.8
6	71	19.7
7	76	21.1
8	47	13.1
9	13	3.6
10	13	3.6
11	2	.6
12	1	.3

Note. Mean score = 6.19

Median score = 6

Modal score = 5

[a]Our scoring conventions eliminated all scores of 4 (barely failing) by making the referee's judgment decisive.

Table 2

Mean Scores and Mean Lengths of Essays

by Topic and Information Level

Level		n	Mean Score	Mean Length in Words
1	(Low Information Load)			
	Topic 1 (Basics)	20	6.45	332
	Topic 2 (Teaching)	20	6.30	347
	Topic 3 (Discipline)	20	6.30	327
	Topic 4 (Four-day week)	20	6.20	309
	Topic 5 (Wastefulness)	20	5.95	301
	Topic 6 (Violence)	20	5.65	303
2	(Moderate Information Load)			
	Topic 1	20	6.30	289
	Topic 2	20	6.20	335
	Topic 3	20	6.80	316
	Topic 4	20	6.15	301
	Topic 5	20	6.10	337
	Topic 6	20	7.05	381
3	(High Information Load)			
	Topic 1	20	6.30	308
	Topic 2	20	6.25	324
	Topic 3	20	5.55	236
	Topic 4	20	6.50	289
	Topic 5	20	5.85	295
	Topic 6	20	5.45	278

Table 3

Mean Scores and Mean Lengths

of Essays by Information Level

Level	Mean Score	Mean Length
1 (Low Information Load)	6.14	320
2 (Moderate Information Load)	6.43	326
3 (High Information Load)	5.98	288

APPENDIX

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF ESSAYS

1. Rhetorical Quality

   1.1 Unity: An ordering and interdependence of parts producing a single effect: completeness.

   1.2 Focus: Concentration on the chosen topic.

   1.3 Clarity: Lucidity of expression; lack of ambiguity and distortion.

   1.4 Sufficiency: Appropriate depth and breadth of expression to meet the writer's purposes and the demands of the particular topic.

2. Structural and Mechanical Quality

   2.1 Organization: Consistent and coherent integration and connection of parts.

   2.2 Development: Appropriate and sufficient exposition of ideas; use of detail, examples, illustrations, comparisons, etc.

2.3 Paragraph and Sentence Structure: Appropriate form, variety, logic, relatedness of and among structural units.

2.4 Syntax: Appropriate ordering of words to convey intended meaning.

3. Observance of Conventions in Writing

3.1 Usage: Appropriate use of language features: inflections, tense, agreement, pronouns, modifiers, vocabulary, level of discourse, etc.

3.2 Spelling, Capitalization, Punctuation: Consistent practice of accepted forms.

DESCRIPTIONS OF LEVELS OF WRITING COMPETENCE

4. The essay is unified, sharply focussed, and distinctively effective. It treats the topic clearly, completely, and in suitable depth and breadth. It is clearly and fully organized, and it develops ideas with consistent appropriateness and thoroughness. The essay reveals an unquestionably firm command of paragraph and sentence structure. Syntactically, it is smooth and often elegant. Usage is uniformly sensible, accurate, and sure. There are very few, if any, errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

3. The essay is focussed and unified, and it is clearly if not distinctively written. It gives the topic an adequate though not always thorough treatment. The essay is well organized, and much of the time it develops ideas appropriately and sufficiently. It shows a good grasp of paragraph and sentence structure, and its usage is generally accurate and sensible. Syntactically, it is clear and reliable. There may be a few errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, but they are not serious.

2. The essay has some degree of unity and focus, but each could be improved. It is reasonably clear, though not invariably so, and it treats the topic with a marginal degree of sufficiency. The essay reflects some concern for organization and for some development of ideas, but neither is necessarily consistent or fully realized. The essay reveals some sense, if not full command, of paragraph and sentence structure. It is syntactically bland and, at times, awkward. Usage is generally accurate, if not consistently so. There are some errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation that detract from the essay's effect if not from its sense.

1. The essay lacks unity and focus. It is distorted and/or ambiguous, and it fails to treat the topic in sufficient depth and breadth. There is little or no discernible organization and only scant development of ideas, if any at all. The essay betrays only sporadically a sense of paragraph and sentence structure, and it is syntactically slipshod. Usage is irregular and often questionable or wrong. There are serious errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.